

Senate Bill 237
February 10, 2011
Presented by Ken McDonald
Senate Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Ken McDonald, Wildlife Bureau Chief of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I am here in opposition to Senate Bill 237.

FWP understands that brucellosis can and has impacted livestock producers. FWP's position is that brucellosis is not a livestock issue, and it is not a wildlife issue, it is a disease issue. While population impacts to wildlife from brucellosis have not been documented, it's in the state's best interest to foster and maintain a healthy livestock industry and healthy wildlife populations.

FWP has been actively engaged in management efforts to reduce the risk of transmission of brucellosis from bison to livestock for over 20 years.

FWP has conducted surveillance for brucellosis in elk since the 1980s, and is addressing risk of transmission of brucellosis between elk and livestock in the Yellowstone area. In addition to monitoring disease prevalence in elk, FWP is investing significant effort into researching elk movements and distribution patterns to identify times and locations where risk is greatest. FWP has liberalized and extended hunting seasons and worked with local landowners to manage hunting to increase elk harvest, reduce populations to objective levels and to redistribute concentrations of elk. FWP provided input to DOL during development of their Brucellosis Action Plan and has committed to working with DOL and producers to implement risk management procedures such as fencing hay stacks and hazing elk in order to minimize comingling of elk and livestock during high-risk periods.

Regarding SB237, FWP assumes Section 1(2)(b) requiring coordination between FWP and DoL in developing brucellosis surveillance and prevalence reduction procedures means that the two agencies must be in agreement on a plan. This is how the two agencies have been working for the past several years. If the intent is that DoL shall develop a surveillance and prevalence reduction plan with or without FWP's concurrence, then FWP would strongly object. FWP has identified the value of a more comprehensive management plan addressing brucellosis in elk, and argues that FWP is the appropriate agency to coordinate that public process and product.

The primary concern FWP has about SB237 is in Section 1(4) which states "the department of fish, wildlife and parks shall pay testing costs for brucellosis surveillance and prevalence reduction in wildlife" upon notification that livestock in the state are infected with brucellosis.

FWP interprets this to mean if there is a positive brucellosis hit in livestock, it would be necessary to immediately implement a surveillance program in a radius around the location where that livestock was located, as well as implement prevalence reduction procedures in the specific wildlife population in the vicinity of the livestock infection. As noted in the fiscal note, a statistically valid sample size for surveillance is in the order of 100 elk per local population. Capture and testing of 100 additional elk as per this proposed statute is a significant additional cost and effort, and it is questionable what the value of this information would be within the area where brucellosis has long been documented and in the context of efforts already in place. For the most part, there is a long documented history of prevalence rates in the area immediately surrounding YNP, and so additional new focus is working cooperatively with DoL and APHIS to enhance understanding of prevalence rates on the fringe of this Yellowstone area.

"Prevalence reduction procedures" could be read to mean test and slaughter, which is extremely controversial, expensive and questionable as to effectiveness on a widely free ranging elk population. An intentional effort to reduce seroprevalence in feed ground situations in Wyoming failed to capture all the elk and, while detected seroprevalence did fall, the effort did not prevent additional infections, does not ensure against seroprevalence increasing again and cost over \$1.5 million for the five year effort. Additionally, the Wyoming study cannot dismiss the potential that some or all of the observed seroprevalence reduction was related to documented annual natural fluctuations in seroprevalence.

While the Wyoming study speaks to a situation where elk are relatively more available for consistent capture than in Montana, the northern Yellowstone elk herd represents a lesson learned in a fully free ranging elk population. Reduced from over 19,000 elk in 1994 to 6,000 observed elk in 2011, the seroprevalence rates have increased from 1% in the early 1990s to an estimated 6-13%% in 2009. Even a reduction of 13,000+ elk hasn't reduced the seroprevalence rate in the upper Yellowstone. Rather, the rate appears to have increased.

Given documented elk movements, the current maintenance of Wyoming's feed grounds essentially ensures a reservoir of brucella not only for Wyoming but Montana and likely Idaho as well. While Wyoming did demonstrate a temporary reduction in prevalence, the cost was exorbitant even when the elk are already congregated at a feed lot. Montana is not interested in establishing feed grounds to attract and congregate elk for prevalence reduction efforts.

Rather than focus on test and slaughter, FWP is attempting to focus efforts on working with landowners to minimize risk of comingling, and therefore reduce brucellosis transmission during high risk periods. This includes understanding prevalence rates, elk movements, and where the risks are highest. It also includes providing hazing to disperse elk and in some case prevent large congregations of elk. Other potentials include providing hunt coordination for landowners willing to allow some hunters on their lands to effectively reduce elk numbers and keep them dispersed. Towards these and other ends, FWP has submitted a budget request through HB2 for FTE and funding. The focus would be hunt coordination, hazing, and other risk minimization efforts. We believe this represents a more sustainable and long-term solution to address brucellosis, minimize risk, and maintain the state's class free status.

We need to be working together to address this and other disease issues to minimize impacts to both livestock and wildlife interests. Only then can we comprehensively assess where disease transmission risk is highest, what factors contribute to risk and to the increased or maintained prevalence, figure out how to reduce risk, and pursue the reduction.

FWP requests you do not pass SB237, recognizing that FWP is already attempting to work with livestock producers on this issue, and instead throw your support to Decision Package 501 in HB2.

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